

A dialogue with Peter McLaren—or, Peter McLaren in his own words.
Interview with Rodolfo Isaac Cisneros Contreras. Education Must Teach Us
to Resist the Intolerable

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Education Must Teach Us to Resist the Intolerable

Peter McLaren

Born of a conviction in and hope for education, a love for humanity—men, women, and children alike—and a deep affection and respect for the work and committed life of the beloved educator and revolutionary Peter McLaren, this long-distance dialogue came to be: I, Rodolfo Cisneros, posed these questions from Mexico, and Peter kindly answered from California, United States. The aim is to

share his work and his life story—as told in his own words—with audiences in Mexico, Latin America, and wherever else it might reach. It is an invaluable opportunity to learn, in a friendly and personal manner, about the paths Peter McLaren has traveled and the challenges he has faced throughout his academic career and his youth in Toronto and Winnipeg; to understand the political repercussions and repression he has endured due to his ideas and writings; and to hear his diagnosis and perspective regarding the times ahead in a world defined by tariffs and fascist roots—a world driven by a necrophilic need for war and a denial of the ontological vocation to "be more."

I am a Mexican educator and philosopher deeply concerned with pedagogical theory, history, and the philosophy of education; however, I do not believe in that brand of academic, university-based pedagogy that claims to be critical yet teaches one to look away from injustice and hunger—a pedagogy that speaks of students as if they were children, ignorant, or incapable of reading the works of great educators firsthand. The life stories of us Latin American educators place us—almost inevitably—face-to-face with people who suffer and go hungry every day; they are right there among us—in our homes, our students, and our fellow teachers. Yet, at the same time, I see how the new world order captures them, gives them a face, and leads them to defend the indefensible. I often think of Spinoza's words regarding those who defend their own enslavement as if it were their freedom. It is at this juncture that the figure of Peter McLaren enters the picture. As it happens, my own intellectual background had already brought me into contact with significant thinkers—such as Nietzsche, Marx, and Hegel—as well as authors less well-known within the field of pedagogy, such as José Porfirio Miranda. When I was 12 or 13, I came across the book *Hunger and Thirst for Justice* on the desk of my uncle—who is also a philosopher and visual artist. That book left a lasting mark on me. Later, the 1999 UNAM strike—and everything that followed

regarding pedagogy and philosophy—solidified my inclination toward studying the humanities and instilled in me a habit of constant critical questioning. Studying Paulo Freire in order to teach the course "Mexican and Latin American Thought" at UNAM's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters led me to the work of Peter McLaren. I read several of his books, and they are now part of my course syllabi. His name had always been present—like that of a "ghost author" whom students should have read but never actually did. His name would come up in conversations among "critical" professors, yet it was obvious they were unfamiliar with his actual work. Ultimately, after re-reading his books on "Che" Guevara and on Paulo Freire and the pedagogy of revolution, I realized just how much Peter's voice is needed in university classrooms. In my view, McLaren's work is necessary in the life of schools in order to revitalize them. One point McLaren made in those books became indelibly etched in my mind: the danger of depoliticizing Freire in the classroom. Peter McLaren's work and thought are just as necessary today as those of Marx, Engels, Spinoza, and Foucault—as well as those of Paulo Freire, Aníbal Ponce, Gabriela Mistral, and Enrique Dussel. Despite capitalism's attempts to co-opt education, we must never stop believing that another world is possible. Peter McLaren, among other things, teaches and urges us to do just that—and to engage in a courageous struggle.

As Mercedes Sosa sang, I give thanks to life—thanks for giving me the courage to write to Peter and ask for an article for *Revista Ixtli*, of the Asociación Latinoamericana de Filosofía de la Educación (ALFE), where I serve as an editor. That request led to the publication of his piece, but it also marked the beginning of what I consider a friendship with a professor and a revolutionary—someone whose every written word constantly urges us to recognize the gravity of the times we live in and to remain steadfast in our educational responsibility and its liberating potential. In short, I offer my heartfelt thanks to Peter for so graciously and

lovingly giving his time to maintain our email correspondence, for his words of encouragement, and for always sharing a new publication in every message.

Thanks for the friendship, Peter.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *Was there any event during your childhood or youth in Toronto and Winnipeg that drew you toward the critical and revolutionary thinking to which you would later contribute? Are there situations that lead you to adopt that kind of mindset and commitment to life?*

Peter McLaren: I was about eleven years old when I arrived in Winnipeg, one of the coldest cities in Western Canada during the winter. One day, I made a snowball and kept it in the freezer overnight. The next day, I threw it at a passing car and shattered the windshield. The driver immediately stopped, got out of the car, and began chasing me.

I ran as fast as I could toward my apartment building. I was looking down at the ground as I ran and slammed headfirst into the corner of the building. The impact knocked me unconscious. A friend carried me back to my apartment, thinking I might be dead. I remained unconscious for a long time, and even today I can still feel the indentation in my skull where my head struck the corner of that building. When I did not appear the next day, my friends became convinced that I had died. It was a childhood experience, but it taught me something I have never forgotten: how suddenly and unexpectedly fate can alter the course of a life. It also forced me, even at that young age, to think about the consequences of my actions and about how easily a thoughtless act can put another person's life—or one's own—at risk.

Later, as a teenager growing up in Toronto and attending high school, I found myself swept into the counterculture of the 1960s. I had a close circle of friends,

and after school—and especially on weekends—we would disappear into a world that seemed to be inventing itself around us.

Toronto had its own bohemian enclave, alive with coffeehouses, folk music, blues, poetry, political argument, and young people searching for ways of living that bore little resemblance to the lives our parents had imagined for us. Some remarkable musicians passed through those small, smoky rooms. Gordon Lightfoot was one of my favorite folk singers. There was an electricity in the air, a sense that the old certainties were cracking open and that somehow we had arrived at precisely the moment when everything might change.

And, of course, we experimented—with ideas, with politics, with music, with consciousness, and with drugs. We were young, reckless, curious, and convinced that somewhere beyond the boundaries imposed upon us there was another way of seeing the world.

One summer, I decided to hitchhike across the border into the United States. I had no grand plan. I simply kept moving until eventually I found myself in San Francisco, in Haight-Ashbury, one of the epicenters of the American counterculture.

One evening, I walked into a club for a drink and noticed a man across the room staring at me. After some time, he came over and introduced himself.

His name was Timothy Leary.

At the time, Leary was perhaps the most famous evangelist of psychedelic consciousness in America—the so-called “high priest of LSD.” He produced some purple pills, and somehow the two of us ended up spending the evening together, talking intensely about consciousness, freedom, society, and what it might mean to escape the mental prisons we inherit without even knowing they are there.

Before he left, Leary wrote me a note.

It contained only a few words:

“You are now free.

Timothy Leary.”

I carried those words with me—not because I believed that freedom could be bestowed by Timothy Leary, or by a pill, or by any countercultural prophet, but because they posed a question that would follow me for the rest of my life: **What does it actually mean to become free?**

Years later, that question would return in another language—in politics, in Marx, in liberation theology, and, most decisively, in Paulo Freire. I came to understand freedom not simply as liberation from convention or an expansion of individual consciousness, but as something we struggle to create collectively: the capacity to understand the forces that shape our lives and to act with others to transform them. I stayed in a crowded house with young people roughly my own age, people who had come to San Francisco from different parts of the United States and Canada. During the day, Haight-Ashbury could feel like a carnival of possibility—music pouring into the streets, young people gathering everywhere, the intoxicating sense that another world was being born. But at night, I began to see another side of America.

The police would break into the house looking for young men who were trying to escape the military draft and avoid being sent to fight in Vietnam. I can still remember the suddenness of those raids—the doors opening, the shouting, the fear, young men being taken away. These were not abstractions from a newspaper or images on television. They were people I knew, people I had eaten with and talked with, being arrested because they refused to participate in a war they believed was profoundly wrong.

Something changed in me.

I began participating in anti-war demonstrations. The Vietnam War was no longer a distant geopolitical conflict. I was witnessing how war entered people's homes, divided families, criminalized dissent, and placed young men in an impossible position: submit to the machinery of war or face the consequences of refusing it. Haight-Ashbury taught me that the counterculture contained two very different impulses. One was the search for personal liberation—the music, the drugs, the experimentation with consciousness and alternative ways of living. But beneath it was something much more consequential: a political rebellion against war, racism, authority, and a social order that many of us had begun to recognize as deeply unjust.

That distinction would become increasingly important in my life. **It was no longer enough to ask how an individual could become free. I was beginning to ask what kind of society makes freedom possible—and what we are prepared to do when that society produces injustice instead.**

I had a high school friend named Jake. He had flaming red hair and a rugged, almost Neanderthal appearance—not what I considered a conventionally handsome young man, although the girls clearly disagreed with me. He was enormously popular with them. But what distinguished Jake most was his mind. He was more intellectually curious than most of the young people in our circle, fiercely independent, and a brilliant writer. Before long, he became the informal leader of our group.

Most weekends we gravitated toward Yorkville Village in downtown Toronto, which in those years was the beating heart of the city's counterculture. The streets were crowded with young people, musicians, poets, artists, drifters, political radicals, and dreamers. The coffeehouses were legendary. You could walk into a small room and hear extraordinary folk and blues musicians performing only a few feet away. We felt that we were living at the edge of something new.

People moved in and out of our circle, but Jake and I became best friends. We talked endlessly—about literature, music, politics, life, and whatever else seized our imaginations. Jake possessed a remarkable talent for writing, but he never had the opportunity to bring that talent before a wider audience. After high school, he had no interest in going to college. Our paths began to diverge.

Jake became addicted to heroin.

I made a different decision. I left Toronto to study Shakespearean drama at the University of Waterloo. In part, I simply wanted to study literature. But there was another reason. I needed to get away. I needed some distance from Toronto, from the drugs, from our circle of friends, and perhaps from the person I was becoming within that world. **I needed a fresh start.**

When I returned to Toronto during a break from university, I asked about Jake.

I learned that he had followed his girlfriend to Paris.

And there, he had hanged himself.

The news devastated me. Someone who had seemed so alive to me —so intelligent, so gifted with language, so capable of commanding a room— was suddenly gone. His brother, another close friend of mine and a brilliant musician, would also die by suicide.

The world of my adolescence began to disappear. Friends drifted away. The intense little community that had once seemed permanent dissolved, as youthful communities often do, but in our case its dissolution carried an unbearable weight. Some people simply moved on. Others were consumed by addiction. And some never made it out alive.

I did.

For a long time, I thought of leaving Toronto for Waterloo simply as a decision to pursue my education. Looking back, I understand that it was more than that. It was

a turning point. I had stepped away from a world I loved before it could swallow me.

Eventually I returned to Toronto and continued my education, ultimately pursuing my doctorate. But I carried Jake with me. I carried the memory of a brilliant young writer who never had the opportunity to become the writer he might have been.

Perhaps that experience also taught me something that would later become fundamental to my work as an educator: **human potential is never enough by itself. Talent does not protect us. Intelligence does not protect us. Young people need communities, possibilities, and reasons to believe that a future exists in which their gifts can find a home.**

Jake never found that future.

I have spent much of my life trying to help others imagine one.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *How would you describe your intellectual experience with European thinkers in general, when contrasted with Latin American experiences of liberation?*

Peter McLaren: European and Latin American traditions of liberation share a concern with oppression, but they often begin from different historical experiences and historical starting points. European radical thinkers such as Marx, Gramsci, Bloch, and the Frankfurt School focused heavily on **capitalism, class, labor, ideology, and the power of the state**. Latin American thinkers such as Paulo Freire, Enrique Dussel, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and José Porfirio Miranda inherited many of these concerns but confronted them from societies profoundly shaped by **colonial conquest, imperialism, economic dependency, racial domination, military dictatorship, and enormous inequalities of land and wealth**. Put simply, European critical theory often asks how capitalist society

reproduces domination, while Latin American liberation thought asks how the world looks **from the standpoint of the oppressed—and how the oppressed themselves can participate in transforming it.**

This difference in standpoint is crucial. Latin American liberation thinkers insist that the poor and oppressed are not merely objects to be studied, rescued, or represented by intellectuals. They are **subjects of history whose experiences can reveal realities that dominant ways of knowing conceal.** In liberation theology this appears as the *preferential option for the poor*; in Freire it takes the form of dialogue, conscientization, and praxis; and in Dussel it appears in the ethical priority given to the victim and the excluded Other. Praxis therefore means more than applying theory to practice. It joins **reflection and action within concrete struggles for humanization.** Latin American thinkers also widen the traditional Marxist focus on capital and labor by bringing colonialism, imperialism, racial oppression, Indigenous dispossession, and relations between powerful nations and dependent societies into the analysis of capitalism.

Perhaps the most striking difference appears in the relationship between liberation and religion. Much European Marxism regarded Christianity primarily as an ideology that reconciled people to suffering. Latin American liberation theology turned that assumption upside down, recovering **Exodus, the Hebrew prophets, Jesus' identification with the marginalized, and the Kingdom of God as resources for confronting oppression.** This helps explain why Freire cannot simply be understood as someone who transported European Marxism to Latin America. He drew deeply from Marx, Hegel, Gramsci, phenomenology, and Christianity, but transformed these traditions through the historical experience and struggles of Latin America. If European radical theory has often moved **from a theory of society toward the oppressed,** Latin American liberation thought more characteristically attempts to build theory **from an encounter with the oppressed.**

That distinction is not absolute, but it captures one of the most important contributions Latin American liberation thought has made to critical pedagogy and to the wider struggle for human emancipation.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *Peter, what avenues remain for critical pedagogy given the apparent rise and hegemonic control of AI? How does the misuse of new technologies—acting as instruments of control and power—disrupt life in the classroom?*

Peter McLaren: The avenues for critical pedagogy have become both more difficult and more urgent given the apparent rise and increasingly hegemonic power of artificial intelligence. AI should not be understood simply as a neutral technological innovation that has suddenly entered the classroom. It needs to be situated within the larger political economy that produces it: concentrated corporate power, surveillance capitalism, the military-industrial complex, and an oligarchic class whose enormous wealth gives it unprecedented influence over public institutions, culture, information, and education.

Critical pedagogy must therefore ask questions that conventional discussions of educational technology frequently avoid: **Who owns these technologies? Who designs the algorithms? Whose interests do they serve? What forms of knowledge do they privilege or suppress? Who benefits economically from their adoption, and who becomes increasingly subject to surveillance, classification, and control?**

The danger is not merely that students will use AI to write papers or that teachers will have difficulty determining whether an assignment is “authentic.” Those concerns are real, but they barely touch the larger problem. Algorithms increasingly mediate everyday experience: what information people encounter,

what news they read, what products they buy, what employment opportunities they see, how they are evaluated by institutions, and even how they understand themselves and other people. When these systems enter schools, they bring those structures of power with them.

The classroom consequently becomes another contested terrain in the struggle over technological power. AI can potentially expand access to knowledge, encourage intellectual exploration, and give students new means of expression. But when deployed without democratic oversight, it can also intensify surveillance, standardization, dependency, and the commodification of education. Teachers may find their professional judgment increasingly displaced by automated assessment systems, predictive analytics, standardized curricula, and administrative technologies that reduce complex human beings to measurable data points.

Students, meanwhile, risk being trained to accommodate themselves to algorithmic authority rather than learning how to interrogate it.

This is precisely where critical pedagogy remains indispensable. Its task is not simply to prohibit AI or romanticize a supposedly technology-free past. It is to **make technology itself an object of critical inquiry**. Students should learn how algorithms are constructed, how data are collected, how bias enters technological systems, how corporations monetize attention and personal information, and how technologies developed for military, intelligence, commercial, and surveillance purposes migrate into ordinary civilian life.

We also need to understand how thoroughly everyday existence has become entangled with the military-industrial complex. Technologies developed through relationships among governments, defense industries, universities, intelligence agencies, and private corporations routinely migrate into civilian society.

Surveillance, facial recognition, drones, predictive systems, data mining, and artificial intelligence blur the traditional distinction between military and civilian

technologies. The same infrastructures that promise convenience and efficiency can become instruments for monitoring populations, disciplining workers, policing borders, conducting warfare, and managing dissent.

Extricating contemporary capitalist society from these arrangements is extraordinarily difficult because technological development is increasingly concentrated in institutions possessing enormous economic and political power.

What might be called an **Epstein oligarchy class** —a social order in which extraordinary concentrations of wealth provide privileged access to political leaders, elite institutions, media, technology, and other centers of influence—raises fundamental questions about democracy itself. The point is larger than any single individual. It concerns a system in which wealth can purchase access, secrecy, influence, and insulation from the conditions governing ordinary people's lives.

Critical pedagogy must expose these relationships without teaching students simply what to think. Its democratic responsibility is more demanding: **to teach students how to investigate power for themselves**. That means examining evidence, questioning institutional narratives, distinguishing documented relationships from speculation, recognizing propaganda and manipulation from every political direction, and developing the intellectual confidence to challenge authority—including the authority of the teacher and the algorithm—.

The central struggle, therefore, is not between human beings and machines. It is over **who will determine the purposes for which machines are developed and used**. AI could become another mechanism through which concentrated economic and political power colonizes everyday life, including education. But it could also become an object of democratic struggle and critical understanding.

The remaining avenue for critical pedagogy is therefore a profoundly important one: creating classrooms in which students learn that technology is neither

inevitable nor politically neutral. Technologies embody choices, values, interests, and relationships of power. Those arrangements were made by human beings, and human beings can challenge and remake them.

In an age increasingly governed by algorithms, perhaps the most radical educational act is to preserve the student's capacity to say: **Who created this system? Why does it work this way? Who benefits from it? Who is harmed by it? And what would a more democratic alternative look like?**

Those questions remain beyond the reach of technological domination precisely because asking them transforms students from passive consumers of technology into critical participants in determining its future.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *Is exile an option today for thinkers and teachers who confront fascist and necrophilic governments? How should one cope with exile and forced displacement?*

Peter McLaren: Exile is a difficult choice but nevertheless remains an option today for thinkers, teachers, journalists, artists, and activists confronting fascist, authoritarian, and what we might call **necrophilic governments**, regimes organized around violence, militarism, disposability, fear, and the destruction rather than enrichment of human life. But exile should never be romanticized. For many people it is not really an “option” at all. It is a condition imposed upon them when remaining at home means imprisonment, persecution, censorship, professional destruction, or death.

The history of critical thought is inseparable from exile. Fascism and authoritarianism have repeatedly attempted to silence intellectuals because critical thought threatens political systems that depend upon obedience, historical amnesia, and fear. The exile of intellectuals from Nazi Germany and fascist Europe provides

perhaps the most familiar example, but the same pattern has appeared under dictatorships throughout Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Teachers and intellectuals are frequently among the first targets because authoritarian governments understand something that democratic societies sometimes forget: **education is a form of power.**

Yet exile produces a profound contradiction. It can save the body while wounding the sense of belonging. The exile survives, but survival may come at the cost of language, community, profession, familiarity, and place. One can escape political repression while carrying its psychological consequences across borders. Forced displacement therefore cannot be understood merely as geographical relocation. It is also an assault upon memory, identity, relationships, and one's sense of being at home in the world.

At the same time, exile can produce a distinctive form of critical consciousness. The person in exile sees society simultaneously from inside and outside. Familiar assumptions become strange. National myths become easier to recognize as myths. Borders, citizenship, patriotism, and belonging cease to appear natural and instead reveal themselves as political constructions. Exile can therefore create what Edward Said described as a contrapuntal consciousness: the ability to inhabit more than one world intellectually and to perceive the tensions between them.

This does not make exile desirable. **Suffering should never be turned into a romantic prerequisite for insight.** But when displacement has been forced upon someone, critical consciousness can become one means of refusing to allow displacement to have the final word.

The question of how one copes with exile therefore becomes inseparable from the question of how one preserves agency. The first responsibility is survival. There is no shame in leaving when remaining would mean imprisonment, torture, professional destruction, or death. The mythology of heroic martyrdom can itself

become dangerous. A dead or silenced intellectual cannot teach, write, organize, love, or participate in the creation of another political future. Sometimes departure is not surrender but a strategy for continuing the struggle elsewhere.

The second task is to preserve relationships. Authoritarian power attempts to isolate people because isolation destroys political possibility. Exiles therefore need communities—other displaced people, colleagues, students, writers, artists, unions, universities, human-rights organizations, and transnational networks capable of sustaining intellectual and emotional life. Solidarity becomes more than an abstract political principle. It becomes a means of survival.

Technology complicates this experience profoundly. Earlier generations of exiles were separated from their countries by enormous geographical and informational distances. Digital communication now allows displaced intellectuals to remain connected to students, colleagues, political movements, and family members almost instantaneously. A professor expelled from a university can potentially continue teaching across borders; a journalist driven from a country can continue publishing; an activist can communicate with movements at home.

But the same technologies that make transnational solidarity possible also make **transnational repression** possible. Governments can monitor communications, track dissidents, conduct digital harassment, spread disinformation, threaten relatives who remain behind, and attempt to silence critics even after they have crossed national borders. Exile in the digital age therefore does not necessarily mean escaping the technological reach of authoritarian power. This is another reason critical pedagogy remains essential. Education must prepare people not merely to recognize fascism after it has consolidated power, but to recognize the conditions that make fascism possible: the normalization of cruelty, the demonization of minorities and migrants, attacks on universities and journalists, contempt for factual truth, militarization of public life, political

demands for unquestioning loyalty, and the gradual transformation of opponents into enemies who supposedly deserve punishment.

The term **necrophilic politics** is useful here because it directs attention beyond conventional definitions of fascism toward a political culture fascinated with domination and death. A necrophilic government treats human beings as expendable objects. It accepts mass suffering as collateral damage, turns migrants into abstractions, converts war into spectacle, reduces children to statistics, and regards ecological destruction as an acceptable cost of economic expansion. Against this politics of death, critical pedagogy must insist upon a politics organized around human flourishing.

For the teacher or intellectual confronting such a government, the ethical question is therefore not simply, “**Should I stay or should I leave?**” The more important question is: “**Where can I remain capable of thinking, teaching, writing, organizing, and resisting?**” Sometimes that place will be one's homeland.

Sometimes it will be another country. Sometimes intellectual life itself becomes a kind of homeland that authoritarian power cannot completely confiscate.

We should also broaden our understanding of exile. Millions of people today experience forms of **internal exile** without crossing a national border. A professor dismissed from a university for political reasons, a journalist blacklisted from major institutions, a teacher prohibited from teaching particular histories, or a dissident pushed outside legitimate public discourse may remain physically at home while being institutionally displaced. Authoritarianism can exile people from public life before it exiles them from territory.

Critical pedagogy must therefore create forms of solidarity capable of crossing both geographical and institutional borders. Universities should provide sanctuary for threatened scholars. Teachers should build international networks before crises occur rather than afterward. Intellectuals in relatively secure societies have an

obligation to amplify the voices of those whose governments attempt to erase them. Students should learn that freedom of thought survives only when institutions and ordinary people are prepared to defend those who exercise it. Ultimately, exile raises one of the oldest questions in political philosophy: **What constitutes a home?** If home means merely territory, exile represents catastrophic loss. But if home can also reside in language, memory, friendship, solidarity, teaching, and political commitment, authoritarian governments possess less power over the exile than they imagine.

A government can remove a professor from a university. It can close a newspaper, ban a book, cancel a passport, or force an intellectual across a border. What it cannot automatically accomplish is the destruction of the intellectual's capacity to think, remember, teach, and form relationships with others.

That is why exile, terrible as it can be, need not mean political disappearance. **The task is to transform displacement into connection, isolation into solidarity, memory into testimony, and survival into continued participation in the struggle for a democratic future.** In that sense, the exile's most profound refusal is simply to remain intellectually and politically alive.

Exile can also be understood through what I have called **ensepulcher**: the process by which an authoritarian and necrophilic order attempts to bury the living before they are physically dead. To ensepulcher is more than to imprison or silence. It is to seal human beings within political and ideological structures that progressively extinguish their capacity to imagine alternatives, exercise agency, speak publicly, and participate in the making of history. The metaphor of the sepulcher is important precisely because authoritarian power does not merely seek obedience; it seeks to construct a social tomb in which memory, dissent, possibility, and hope are buried alongside those who refuse submission.

From this perspective, exile can become an act of resistance to ensepulcherment. The intellectual who leaves an authoritarian society may lose geography, institutional belonging, language, familiarity, and community, but departure can also represent a refusal to be buried alive within the ideological architecture of fascism. The crucial question is no longer simply whether one stays or leaves. It becomes: **How does one refuse to become ensepulchered?** How does one preserve the capacity to think, teach, remember, love, create, and struggle when political power is organized precisely to extinguish those capacities?

This also explains why exile cannot be reduced to crossing a border. One can remain physically at home and nevertheless become **internally ensepulchered**—isolated from public life, expelled from institutions, deprived of a political voice, surrounded by propaganda, and gradually persuaded that meaningful alternatives no longer exist. Indeed, one of authoritarianism's greatest victories occurs when repression no longer requires a prison because individuals have learned to police the boundaries of their own imagination.

Critical pedagogy must therefore become a pedagogy against ensepulcherment. Its purpose is not simply to transmit oppositional knowledge but to keep historical possibility alive. It creates spaces in which students and teachers can recover memory, name structures of domination, imagine alternatives, and encounter one another as unfinished human beings rather than objects to be administered by the state, the market, or the algorithm.

Understood this way, exile presents a terrible paradox. **One may sometimes have to leave one's home in order not to become entombed within it.** Exile can preserve the very capacities authoritarianism seeks to destroy: memory, imagination, solidarity, testimony, and hope. The exile carries these across the border and, in doing so, denies the necrophilic state its desired victory. The body has departed, but the critical voice has not been buried.

Perhaps this is ultimately the connection between exile and hope. Against a politics that would ensepulcher the future, the task of the critical intellectual is to remain capable of imagining that the tomb can be opened. **Exile then becomes not the abandonment of struggle but, under certain historical conditions, the means by which struggle survives.**

Rodolfo Cisneros: *Do you think there are still teachers who fear transforming their educational practice into a liberating one? How can we awaken what Freire—in Education as the Practice of Freedom—called *coragem para lutar*? What should that struggle look like today?*

Peter McLaren: What should that struggle look like today Let me answer this question from the context of what is happening in the United States. There are certainly teachers who fear transforming their educational practice into a liberating one, but we should be careful about interpreting that fear as a failure of courage. Fear has a material basis. Teachers have mortgages, families, medical bills, careers, and reputations that can be destroyed. When institutions make dissent costly, fear becomes one of the mechanisms through which power reproduces itself.

It used to be that when you received **tenure**, after many years of establishing yourself as a serious scholar and teacher, you had achieved an extraordinary degree of professional security. Tenure was never simply a reward for publishing books and articles or surviving the exhausting probationary years of academic life. At its best, tenure represented a democratic principle: **a scholar should be able to pursue unpopular ideas, criticize powerful institutions, challenge governments, and defend controversial positions without fearing that a dean, politician, donor, or governing board could simply eliminate his or her livelihood.**

This is why attacks on tenure must be understood as more than administrative restructuring. Where tenure is weakened or abolished, the consequences can reach directly into academic freedom and freedom of expression. The question confronting a professor changes. Instead of asking, *What do I believe to be true? What does the evidence demand? What injustice needs to be named?* the professor may begin asking, *What am I permitted to say? Who might object? Could this cost me my position?*

That transformation is devastating because censorship does not always require someone standing at the classroom door. The most effective censorship occurs when teachers begin censoring themselves.

The contemporary university is particularly vulnerable to this form of control. Increasing numbers of instructors work without tenure or meaningful job security. Adjunct professors and contingent faculty can depend upon contracts that are renewed semester by semester or year by year. Under those conditions, the theoretical freedom to speak means considerably less when exercising that freedom can threaten one's livelihood. A university can proclaim its devotion to free inquiry while simultaneously creating employment conditions that make genuinely risky inquiry increasingly difficult.

I know something about the consequences of refusing political quietude.

Throughout my career, I have been attacked for crossing boundaries that others believed an academic should not cross. I have been criticized for working with the administration of **Hugo Chávez in Venezuela**, for serving as a **Chair Professor in China**, and for criticizing what I call the **Epstein class**—the oligarchic networks of wealth, privilege, secrecy, and access that reveal how profoundly democratic institutions can be compromised when enormous concentrations of economic power become intertwined with political and cultural authority.

These experiences have reinforced something I learned from Paulo Freire: **critical pedagogy cannot be separated from risk.**

But risk should not be confused with recklessness. Freire's “courage to struggle” does not require teachers to become martyrs. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the capacity to understand one's fear politically and then decide, collectively and ethically, what forms of resistance remain possible.

This distinction matters enormously today. An untenured teacher supporting a family cannot simply be instructed to “be courageous” by a tenured professor who enjoys institutional protection. That would transform courage into privilege.

Critical pedagogy must therefore create the material conditions under which courage becomes possible. Teachers need unions, professional organizations, legal protections, networks of solidarity, independent media, supportive colleagues, and institutions willing to defend academic freedom when political pressure arrives.

The struggle must consequently be **collective rather than heroic.**

Authoritarian politics prefers isolated opponents. An isolated professor can be dismissed, demonized, harassed, or professionally destroyed. A community of teachers, students, journalists, artists, workers, lawyers, and citizens is considerably more difficult to silence. Solidarity transforms individual vulnerability into collective power.

This is where Freire's concept of courage becomes especially important. The courage to struggle is cultivated through praxis—the dialectical relationship between reflection and action. We learn courage by acting with others, reflecting upon the consequences, revising our strategies, and acting again. Courage is therefore not something a heroic individual possesses before entering political struggle. **Courage is produced through struggle itself.**

What should that struggle look like today?

It must begin by defending the university as a democratic public sphere rather than treating education as merely a private investment or employment credential.

Teachers and students must resist attempts to turn universities into corporations whose principal obligations are to donors, markets, rankings, and political patrons. Academic freedom must be defended not as a special privilege enjoyed by professors but as part of society's larger right to ask questions that powerful institutions would prefer not to answer.

The struggle must also extend beyond the university. Teachers should connect attacks on education to attacks on journalists, immigrants, racial and religious minorities, workers, LGBTQ communities, dissidents, and other groups whose vulnerability can be exploited by authoritarian movements. Fascism succeeds partly by fragmenting these struggles and persuading each threatened population that it stands alone.

At the same time, educators confront a new terrain of power that Freire could only partially have anticipated: **algorithmic governance**. Surveillance technologies, artificial intelligence, social-media platforms, data extraction, and automated systems increasingly determine which voices become visible and which disappear. The struggle for educational freedom must therefore include the struggle over technology itself—who owns it, who programs it, whose interests it serves, and whether democratic publics have any meaningful authority over its development. This brings us back to what I have called **ensepulcher**. Authoritarian power attempts not merely to defeat opposition but to ensepulcher the political imagination—to bury alternatives so thoroughly that people cease believing another world is possible. Fear is one of the instruments that seals this ideological tomb. When teachers become afraid to ask certain questions, when students learn that conformity is safer than curiosity, and when universities reward silence more

reliably than dissent, education itself risks becoming a mechanism of ensepulcherment.

Critical pedagogy must break open that tomb.

This is what Freire's courage to struggle means to me today. It means refusing the proposition that history has ended, that capitalism represents the final horizon of human possibility, that authoritarianism is irresistible, or that technology inevitably belongs to those who possess the greatest wealth and power. It means teaching students that institutions are historical creations and therefore can be transformed by human beings.

But teachers cannot awaken this courage in students through lectures about courage. **We must demonstrate it.** Students notice whether their teachers are willing to question authority, admit uncertainty, defend unpopular voices, revise their own positions, and stand beside people who are being attacked. Pedagogy becomes liberating when the classroom itself becomes an experience of democracy rather than merely a discussion about democracy.

The struggle today must therefore occur simultaneously in the classroom, the university, the workplace, the media, the streets, and the technological sphere. It must defend academic freedom and tenure while demanding genuine security and dignity for those teachers who have never possessed either. It must connect education to broader struggles against oligarchy, racism, militarism, authoritarianism, ecological destruction, and the transformation of human beings into commodities and data.

Above all, it must recover hope as a political category.

Hope, for Freire, was never optimism. Optimism expects things to improve. **Radical hope demands that we participate in making improvement**

possible. The courage to struggle begins when teachers and students recognize that fear is real but refuse to permit fear to determine the boundaries of the possible. The task of critical pedagogy today is therefore not to teach students that they should be fearless. It is to help create communities in which **people become courageous together.**

And perhaps that is the most dangerous thing education can offer an authoritarian society: not an individual hero, but generations of human beings who have learned that they do not have to struggle alone.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *How do you experience the memory and legacy of Paulo Freire today, twenty-seven years after his death in 1997?*

Peter McLaren: Of course, I think of Paulo frequently. He has always been a guide for me—not simply because of the extraordinary intellectual legacy he left behind, but because of the human being I came to know. Twenty-seven years after his death, I continue to feel his presence in the questions I ask about education, capitalism, oppression, liberation, and hope. Paulo is the heart of critical pedagogy. Without him, the field as we understand it today would be almost unimaginable.

I first met Paulo in person in 1985, at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago. I remember that he filled an auditorium with some 500 people. It was becoming unmistakably clear that North American educators were discovering the extraordinary importance of his work. I was already close friends with Henry Giroux and Donaldo Macedo, who were themselves close to Paulo, and it was through that intellectual and personal circle that I came to know him. What astonished me was discovering that Paulo already knew my work and spoke generously about it. I had no idea that he had been

reading me. That generosity would characterize our relationship in the years that followed. Two years later, in 1987, Paulo invited you to speak at an international conference in Havana. Meeting Paulo was different from encountering him through his books. I had already been profoundly influenced by his work, but the man himself possessed a humility and graciousness that could easily be overlooked by people who know him only as one of the great educational thinkers of the twentieth century.

Paulo was always extraordinarily gracious with me. One gesture that remains especially meaningful was his writing the preface to my book *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Era*. He referred to me as his “intellectual cousin,” a description that moved me deeply and that I have never forgotten.

What made Paulo remarkable was that his personal manner embodied his pedagogy. He listened. He was curious. He did not need to dominate a conversation in order to demonstrate his intellectual authority. There was a consistency between the ethics of dialogue that appeared in his books and the way he encountered other human beings. That is rarer among intellectuals than we sometimes care to admit. Freire understood that education is never politically innocent. Every pedagogy contains assumptions about what it means to be human, what constitutes legitimate knowledge, whose experiences matter, and what kind of society we believe is possible. His great contribution was to make those assumptions visible and then insist that education could become a practice through which people learn not merely to read the word but to read the world critically in order to transform it. This is why Freire matters perhaps even more urgently today than he did when I first encountered him. We are living through a period characterized by resurgent authoritarianism, staggering concentrations of wealth, ecological catastrophe, militarism, algorithmic surveillance, artificial intelligence, and the increasing

colonization of everyday life by corporate power. The technologies have changed dramatically since Paulo wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but the fundamental question he posed has not: Will human beings become objects of history, or subjects capable of making history?

Paulo's work was ultimately about recovering that human capacity for historical agency.

There is a danger, however, in turning Freire into an icon. Paulo would be poorly served if critical pedagogy simply repeated his vocabulary as though his writings constituted scripture. To honor Freire means to reinvent his work under contemporary historical conditions. It means asking what conscientization means in an age of algorithms; what dialogue means when communication is mediated by corporations; what liberation means when surveillance enters the classroom; and what the pedagogy of the oppressed means when oppression is simultaneously economic, racial, gendered, technological, ecological, and imperial.

I also think Paulo would insist that hope remains indispensable. But Freirean hope was never passive optimism. It was not the sentimental conviction that everything would somehow turn out well. Hope had to be produced through struggle. It emerged through praxis, through human beings acting together upon conditions they had learned critically to understand.

That understanding of hope has become increasingly important to me.

Against what I have called ensepulcher—the attempt of authoritarian and necrophilic systems to bury historical possibility and convince us that no alternative future remains—Freire offers a pedagogy of resurrection. He reminds us that history is unfinished. Human beings are unfinished. And precisely because we are unfinished, the future cannot be completely predetermined by capitalism, fascism, oligarchy, technology, or any other structure of domination.

This is why I still carry Paulo with me.

His legacy does not reside primarily in conferences devoted to his work, university courses bearing his name, or the enormous scholarly literature that has grown around him, valuable as these may be. His legacy survives whenever a teacher refuses to treat a student as an object; whenever people learn to name the structures responsible for their suffering; whenever dialogue replaces domination; whenever education becomes connected to collective struggle; and whenever human beings recover the audacity to believe that the world can be otherwise.

Twenty-seven years after Paulo's death, I do not experience him simply as a memory.

I experience him as a presence.

And in a historical moment increasingly organized around fear, authoritarianism, war, surveillance, and what I have called ensepulcherment, Paulo's insistence upon love, dialogue, solidarity, courage, and revolutionary hope remains one of the most powerful antidotes we possess against the politics of death.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *What do you consider to be the primary responsibility of the critical pedagogue today? How can one be loving and revolutionary while surrounded by fascism, poverty, and necrophilia?*

Peter McLaren: The primary responsibility of the critical pedagogue today is to remain committed to the struggle for human liberation while recognizing that there is no single way to participate in that struggle. What each of us is capable of doing changes with our circumstances, our responsibilities, our health, our age, and the historical conditions in which we find ourselves. Revolutionary commitment should never be measured by how exhausted we are willing to become.

I used to travel constantly. For decades, much of my political and pedagogical work took place through travel, speaking with educators, students, activists, and

social movements in different parts of the world. Health issues and age have now made that kind of life impossible for me. I have had to confront the fact that I cannot participate in the struggle in precisely the same way that I once did.

But that does not mean that the struggle has ended for me. It means that the form of my participation has changed.

I will continue to write. I will continue to remain in dialogue with critical educators throughout the world. I will continue to participate in interviews, exchange ideas, support younger scholars, challenge fascism and capitalism, and develop critical pedagogy as a language of resistance and possibility. Writing and dialogue have therefore become my primary means of revolutionary activity.

There is an important lesson here that applies beyond my own circumstances: we do what we are able to do.

That will vary enormously from person to person. One teacher may organize a union. Another may transform a classroom. Someone else may participate in demonstrations, defend immigrants, work with community organizations, write articles, create art, support political prisoners, organize against war, teach people to recognize propaganda, or simply create a space in which frightened young people discover that their lives have value.

No single form of struggle should become the measure against which all others are judged.

This is particularly important because activists and critical educators need to acknowledge their limitations. We live within a political culture that frequently turns exhaustion into a virtue. Even oppositional movements can reproduce this logic, implicitly suggesting that the person who sacrifices the most, travels the most, speaks the most, organizes the most, or sleeps the least is somehow the most committed revolutionary.

I reject that idea.

Burnout does not liberate anybody.

We cannot struggle effectively against a system that treats human beings as disposable by treating ourselves and our comrades as disposable. Rest is not necessarily withdrawal from political struggle. Under certain circumstances, preserving one's physical and emotional capacity to continue the struggle is itself a political responsibility.

This connects directly to the question of how one can remain both loving and revolutionary while surrounded by fascism, poverty, and necrophilia.

For me, these are not opposing qualities. A revolutionary politics without love can easily reproduce the cruelty it claims to oppose. And love without a willingness to confront the structures producing suffering can become sentimentality.

Revolutionary love must therefore be demanding.

It means loving human beings enough to refuse the conditions that humiliate them. It means refusing to accept poverty as inevitable when enormous wealth exists alongside it. It means refusing to accept war as a permanent condition of civilization. It means defending migrants when governments transform them into scapegoats, defending teachers when politicians attempt to silence them, defending children when poverty denies them meaningful futures, and defending the planet against an economic system prepared to sacrifice ecological survival for accumulation.

Love becomes revolutionary when it refuses to accommodate itself to organized suffering.

This is why I continue to find Paulo Freire indispensable. Paulo understood love not as a retreat from politics but as one of the conditions for authentic political struggle. Dialogue requires love because dialogue begins with recognizing that another human being is not an object to be manipulated. Liberation similarly requires love because the purpose of revolutionary struggle is not simply to reverse

the positions of oppressor and oppressed. It is to create social relations in which domination itself can be overcome.

That is an extraordinarily difficult principle to maintain when confronting fascism. Fascism invites us into its emotional universe. It wants us to hate as it hates. It wants politics organized around enemies. It wants humiliation answered with humiliation and violence answered only with greater violence. One of the greatest challenges facing the revolutionary educator is therefore to resist fascism without becoming spiritually colonized by fascism.

This does not mean passivity. Love is not submission.

There are circumstances in which resistance must be confrontational. There are institutions that must be challenged, movements that must be organized, strikes that must be supported, demonstrations that must fill the streets, and structures of power that must be dismantled. Revolutionary love does not ask oppressed people to make themselves harmless to their oppressors.

Rather, it asks us continually to remember what we are struggling for.

We struggle against poverty because human beings deserve dignity. We struggle against racism because human beings should not be reduced to racial hierarchies. We struggle against fascism because people deserve democratic agency. We struggle against necrophilia because life itself must take precedence over systems organized around death, accumulation, domination, and disposability.

This is also where what I have called **ensepulcher** becomes important. Fascist and necrophilic systems do not merely oppress people materially. They attempt to ensepulcher hope itself—to bury our capacity to imagine that the world could be otherwise. They want us to believe that capitalism is permanent, war inevitable, oligarchy unbeatable, technology uncontrollable, and meaningful resistance futile. The critical pedagogue must refuse that burial.

Our responsibility is to keep historical possibility alive.

But we must do so sustainably. A twenty-five-year-old activist and an eighty-year-old scholar will not participate in struggle in identical ways, nor should they. A teacher supporting children cannot necessarily assume the risks available to someone with greater economic security. Someone living under an authoritarian government confronts different choices from someone writing from relative safety. A person struggling with illness may contribute through writing or conversation when marching in the streets is no longer possible.

Different circumstances require different forms of courage.

What matters is not whether everyone performs the same revolutionary acts. What matters is whether we remain connected to a collective struggle against the conditions that diminish human beings.

For me now, that means writing.

Words travel when bodies cannot.

An essay can cross a border that its author can no longer cross. A book can enter a classroom thousands of miles away. A conversation with a young educator can continue through that educator's students long after the conversation itself has ended. Ideas can become forms of companionship among people who may never meet physically but nevertheless recognize one another as participants in the same unfinished struggle.

I no longer measure revolutionary activity by the number of airplanes I board, countries I visit, or lectures I deliver. I measure it increasingly by whether something I write or say helps another person recognize that the present order is neither natural nor inevitable.

That is enough reason to continue.

Perhaps this is one of the lessons age has taught me: we must permit our forms of struggle to change without believing that our commitment has diminished. There is

no shame in acknowledging the limits of the body. The struggle is larger than any individual life, which is precisely why we need one another.

The responsibility of the critical pedagogue today is therefore not to become a revolutionary hero. It is to remain available to the struggle in whatever ways one's circumstances permit, while helping others discover their own capacities for participation.

We write. We teach. We organize. We demonstrate. We listen. We protect. We remember. We create. We rest when we must. And then, when we are able, we return.

Against fascism, we defend democracy. Against poverty, we demand justice. Against necrophilia, we affirm life. Against ensepulchment, we keep open the possibility of another future.

And against despair, we practice a revolutionary love that insists, stubbornly and collectively, that another world remains possible.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *It is well known that you have authored a considerable number of books on critical pedagogy and revolutionary critical pedagogy, and that you currently write many articles—whether on education or regarding your stance on and support for just causes around the world. That said, how does Peter McLaren think new education students, as well as today's children and youth, might best approach your body of work and thought? Would you propose a sort of introductory pathway to your work and ideas?*

Peter McLaren: If I were advising a young education student—or, for that matter, anyone encountering my work for the first time—I would not begin with my most theoretical writing. I would begin with *Life in Schools*.

There is a reason for this. *Life in Schools* begins not with abstract theory but with lived experience. The book grew in part out of the diary I kept while teaching elementary school in an inner-city school in Toronto. That diary was originally published separately in Canada as *Cries from the Corridor*, where it became a national bestseller and helped generate considerable public debate about the conditions of Canada's inner-city schools.

The diary matters because it introduces many of the questions that have remained with me throughout my intellectual life before those questions acquire the specialized vocabulary of critical theory. What does inequality actually look like in a classroom? How does poverty enter the school with the child? How do race and social class shape educational experience? What happens when bureaucratic institutions confront the complicated realities of children's lives? What kinds of knowledge count in schools, and whose knowledge is ignored? How does a teacher respond when the problems children bring into the classroom cannot possibly be solved by pedagogy alone?

These are theoretical questions, of course, but I encountered them first as **human questions**.

That is why I think *Life in Schools* provides the most accessible doorway into my work. Readers encounter the classroom before they encounter the theoretical apparatus I later use to interpret it. The remainder of the book attempts to make sense of those experiences through increasingly theoretical approaches to schooling, culture, ideology, power, resistance, and critical pedagogy. In that sense, the structure of the book reflects something fundamental about my understanding of critical pedagogy: **we begin with lived experience, but we cannot stop there**. Experience needs theory because experience does not explain itself.

A teacher can recognize that a child is suffering without necessarily understanding the social relations producing that suffering. Critical pedagogy asks us to move

from the immediate experience of the classroom toward an understanding of the larger structures within which that classroom exists—capitalism, class relations, racism, patriarchy, colonialism, ideology, culture, and the state. And then it asks us to make the return journey: from theory back into educational and political practice.

I was enormously fortunate that *Life in Schools* became connected to two figures who profoundly influenced my understanding of liberation: **Paulo Freire and Leonardo Boff**, who contributed forewords to different editions. *Life in Schools* included a foreword by liberation theologian **Leonardo Boff** in its third edition. Paulo Freire, meanwhile, wrote the preface to my 1995 book *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture*, where he memorably described our intellectual kinship. Their presence in the history of the book symbolizes something important about my own intellectual trajectory. Freire brought to critical pedagogy an extraordinary understanding of dialogue, conscientization, praxis, hope, and the struggle of oppressed people to become subjects of history. Boff brought the radical Christian and liberation-theological insistence that faith must take the side of the poor and oppressed rather than become an ideological sanctuary for existing power.

Readers who begin with *Life in Schools* can therefore see how my work gradually develops from the immediate realities of teaching toward the larger political project that eventually became what I call **revolutionary critical pedagogy**. From there, I would encourage readers to move selectively rather than feeling obligated to read my books chronologically. I have written a great deal, and I certainly do not expect a young student to begin at one end of the bookshelf and march obediently toward the other. Reading should be an encounter, not a punishment.

I would next suggest *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture* because it represents an important development in my thinking about culture, politics, identity, capitalism, and education. Paulo Freire graciously wrote the preface to that book and referred to me as his “intellectual cousin,” words that have remained deeply meaningful to me. The book shows critical pedagogy moving beyond a narrowly defined classroom practice toward a critique of the broader cultural and political forces shaping consciousness.

After that, readers interested in the explicitly Marxist and revolutionary direction of my work can move into my writings on **revolutionary critical pedagogy**. There the central question becomes increasingly direct: if capitalism systematically produces exploitation, alienation, inequality, and ecological devastation, is it sufficient for critical pedagogy merely to make capitalism somewhat more humane? Or must education participate in the struggle to move beyond capitalist social relations themselves?

That question marks an important distinction between liberal approaches to critical pedagogy and the revolutionary critical pedagogy I have attempted to develop.

But I would also tell young readers something that is perhaps more important than any reading list: **do not read me in order to become a McLarenian.**

I would consider that a failure.

Read me critically. Argue with me. Identify my contradictions. Determine where historical circumstances have changed since I wrote something. Put my work into conversation with Freire, Marx, liberation theology, feminism, anti-racist thought, Indigenous knowledge, decolonial theory, ecological movements, and intellectual traditions I may not have adequately engaged. Critical pedagogy becomes useless when it hardens into orthodoxy.

The same principle applies to Paulo Freire. We honor our intellectual influences not by repeating them but by **reinventing their questions under new historical conditions**.

For today's children and young people, those conditions are dramatically different from the world in which *Life in Schools* was first written. They inhabit an environment structured by social media, algorithms, artificial intelligence, climate catastrophe, unprecedented concentrations of wealth, resurgent fascism, war, surveillance, and the commodification of almost every dimension of everyday life. A young person encountering my work today should therefore continually ask: *What does this argument mean now?*

What does critical literacy mean when an algorithm decides which information you encounter?

What does ideology mean when corporations can personalize propaganda for individual users?

What does alienation mean when young people's identities become commodities measured through clicks, likes, followers, and data?

What does revolutionary pedagogy mean when artificial intelligence can reproduce enormous quantities of knowledge while remaining embedded within structures of corporate ownership and political power?

And what does hope mean when young people are repeatedly told that ecological catastrophe, permanent war, economic insecurity, and authoritarianism constitute the future they must simply learn to inhabit?

Those questions are not peripheral to my work. They are precisely how I would want a new generation to continue it.

If there is a pathway through my writing, then, it begins with the child and the classroom in *Life in Schools*. From there it moves toward culture and ideology,

then toward capitalism and revolutionary critical pedagogy, and finally outward into the struggles of the present.

But the pathway should never terminate in my books.

The purpose of critical pedagogy is not to produce readers who can correctly explain Peter McLaren. It is to help produce human beings capable of reading the world critically and participating in its transformation.

My books are invitations into that struggle, not maps containing a predetermined destination.

If young people eventually put some of my books aside because they have developed ideas better suited to the world they inhabit, I would not regard that as a rejection of my work. I would regard it as evidence that critical pedagogy remains alive.

The greatest legacy a critical educator can hope for is not disciples.

It is successors who surpass us.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *What was the path taken to arrive at what you call "revolutionary prophetic pedagogy"?*

Peter McLaren: I am glad you asked this question because **revolutionary prophetic pedagogy** is a term I have only begun using relatively recently, although the intellectual, political, ethical, and spiritual currents that led me toward it have been developing in my work for many years.

I chose the term deliberately. Many critical educators, for understandable reasons, prefer not to discuss religion in their scholarly work. Some are secular or atheist; others are understandably suspicious of organized religion because of the role religious institutions have played historically in colonialism, patriarchy, racism,

antisemitism, homophobia, authoritarianism, and the legitimation of class power. Critical pedagogy must take those histories seriously.

But I have reached a point in my life when I want to be completely explicit about something that has become increasingly important to my own work: my understanding of critical pedagogy is profoundly influenced by my practice as a Catholic.

I was not raised Catholic. I became Catholic later in life, and importantly, I did not first become Catholic and subsequently discover liberation theology. In important respects, the movement occurred in the opposite direction. My engagement with liberation theology helped bring me to Catholicism.

That distinction matters.

I was drawn not toward a Christianity that asks oppressed people to endure their suffering patiently in expectation of compensation in another world. I was drawn toward a tradition that asked why suffering exists in this world, who benefits from it, and what Christians are obligated to do about it. Liberation theology confronted me with a Christianity that did not separate salvation from justice or faith from the struggle of the poor.

The work of liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff was particularly important in helping me understand Christianity as a praxis of solidarity with the oppressed. Liberation theology's "preferential option for the poor" resonated deeply with the Marxist and Freirean traditions that had already shaped my political and pedagogical commitments. It provided another language for asking questions that had long preoccupied me: Who suffers? Why do they suffer? Who benefits from their suffering? And what does genuine solidarity demand of us?

This did not mean abandoning Marx. The work of Jose Porfirio Miranda figures prominently in my thinking about Marx and Christianity.

I increasingly came to understand Marxism and liberation theology as traditions that could enter into a productive and sometimes difficult dialogue. Marx provides indispensable tools for understanding exploitation, commodity production, alienation, class struggle, and the social relations of capital. Liberation theology asks us to confront these realities not only as political and economic problems but also as profound ethical and spiritual affronts to human dignity.

There are tensions between these traditions, certainly. Those tensions should not be concealed. But I have never believed that intellectual life advances by pretending contradictions do not exist. Sometimes the most generative thinking takes place precisely at the point where traditions that appear incompatible are brought into dialogue.

The word **prophetic** therefore needs clarification.

By prophetic I do not mean predicting the future. The prophetic tradition with which I identify is fundamentally concerned with speaking truth in the face of power. The biblical prophets condemned rulers who accumulated wealth while the poor suffered. They denounced corruption, exploitation, false piety, and societies that performed religious rituals while tolerating injustice.

The prophet, in this sense, does not tell us what will happen tomorrow.

The prophet tells us what we refuse to see today.

That is profoundly pedagogical.

A revolutionary prophetic pedagogy attempts to make visible the suffering that dominant institutions render invisible. It asks students and teachers to identify the structures responsible for poverty rather than treating poverty as an unfortunate accident. It asks why some populations are considered disposable, why wars become normalized, why migrants become objects of hatred, why ecological destruction is tolerated, and why unimaginable concentrations of wealth coexist with hunger and homelessness.

But prophetic denunciation is only half of the task.

There must also be **annunciation**: the announcement that another way of organizing human existence remains possible. Here the prophetic tradition encounters Paulo Freire. Freire understood that critical pedagogy cannot survive through denunciation alone. We must denounce the structures that dehumanize while simultaneously announcing the possibility of another world.

This is where revolutionary prophetic pedagogy becomes inseparable from **hope**. Hope, however, is not optimism. It is not the belief that history will automatically move toward justice. History gives us no reason for such complacency. Fascism can triumph. Wars can destroy generations. Capitalism can devastate communities and ecosystems. Human beings are capable of extraordinary cruelty.

Hope becomes revolutionary only when it enters into praxis.

We hope by struggling.

We hope by organizing.

We hope by teaching.

We hope by refusing to accept the inevitability of the world as it has been given to us.

This is also why I use the word **revolutionary**. A prophetic pedagogy that merely condemns individual immorality while leaving the structures producing exploitation untouched is insufficient. Charity can alleviate suffering, and there are moments when charity is absolutely necessary. A hungry person needs food now, not after the revolution. But revolutionary pedagogy must also ask why people are hungry in a society capable of producing extraordinary abundance.

The question moves from **How can we help the poor?** to **Why does our society continually produce poverty?**

That movement—from compassion toward structural transformation—is central to revolutionary prophetic pedagogy.

It also shapes how I understand the figure of Jesus. I do not understand Jesus primarily as a guarantor of respectable social order. I encounter Jesus among the poor, the excluded, the condemned, and those whom dominant society regarded as disposable. The radical message of the Gospel continually overturns hierarchies of prestige and power. It asks what we owe the stranger, the prisoner, the hungry, the sick, and the rejected.

For me, those questions cannot be separated from politics.

A Christianity that can remain comfortable with extreme poverty, racism, war, torture, ecological destruction, or the demonization of migrants has severed itself from the prophetic tradition it claims to represent. Religious language can become another ideology protecting power. Revolutionary prophetic pedagogy must therefore be prepared to criticize Christianity itself whenever Christianity becomes aligned with domination.

This is particularly urgent in an age when forms of **Christian nationalism** attempt to fuse religious identity with authoritarian political power. The prophetic tradition I am describing stands against such a fusion. Faith cannot become an instrument for sanctifying empire, racial supremacy, oligarchy, or state violence.

Indeed, the prophetic responsibility is precisely the opposite: **to stand with those whom empire crucifies.**

This brings revolutionary prophetic pedagogy into direct relationship with what I have described as **necrophilic politics**. We inhabit systems increasingly organized around death: war, ecological devastation, militarized borders, mass incarceration, abandonment of the poor, and an economic order prepared to sacrifice human beings to accumulation.

Against necrophilia, revolutionary prophetic pedagogy must affirm life.

And against what I have called **ensepulcher** —the attempt to bury historical possibility, to entomb hope and convince human beings that no alternative to the

existing order can be imagined—the prophetic educator must insist that the tomb is not the final horizon of history.

Here the Christian language of resurrection acquires political significance for me. Resurrection should not become an excuse to tolerate suffering in this world because justice awaits us somewhere else. Quite the opposite. Resurrection represents the radical refusal to grant death the final word. Politically and pedagogically, it becomes a language for insisting that systems appearing permanent can be overcome, that identities imposed upon oppressed people can be refused, and that historical possibilities pronounced dead can be recovered.

Against ensepulchrement, revolutionary prophetic pedagogy offers resurrection.

I recognize, of course, that many of my comrades in critical pedagogy do not share my Catholic faith. They do not need to. Revolutionary prophetic pedagogy is not an attempt to convert critical pedagogy into Catholic pedagogy or to require religious belief as a condition of revolutionary commitment.

An atheist, a Muslim, a Jew, a Buddhist, an Indigenous spiritual practitioner, or someone who rejects religious identification altogether can participate fully in the struggle for human liberation. The question is not whether we share the same metaphysics. The question is whether we can stand together against the conditions that degrade human beings.

My Catholicism explains **where I stand**, not where everyone else must stand.

That is why I have begun using the term revolutionary prophetic pedagogy. At this stage of my life, I no longer want to bracket the spiritual dimension of my political and pedagogical commitments as though it were somehow intellectually embarrassing or theoretically irrelevant. Liberation theology has become too important to my understanding of justice, solidarity, love, hope, and human dignity for me to pretend otherwise.

Paulo Freire taught me that education can become a practice of freedom. Marx taught me to understand the structures of capital that make freedom impossible for millions. Liberation theology taught me that solidarity with the oppressed is not simply an intellectual position but an **ethical demand upon how one lives**.

Revolutionary prophetic pedagogy emerges for me at the intersection of those traditions.

It asks us to analyze exploitation with rigor, confront power without fear, stand beside the oppressed rather than speak on their behalf, and preserve revolutionary hope in a historical moment determined to extinguish it.

It is Marxist in its critique of capital, Freirean in its commitment to dialogue and praxis, liberationist in its preferential option for the poor, and prophetic in its refusal to remain silent before injustice.

And perhaps most importantly, it insists that **love and revolution belong together**. A revolution without love risks reproducing domination under another name. Love without revolutionary struggle risks becoming sentimentality.

Revolutionary prophetic pedagogy attempts to hold the two together: a love strong enough to struggle and a struggle whose ultimate purpose is the liberation of life.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *In your book **Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture**, you discuss "market identities." Based on an aesthetic manufactured by capitalism, these identities replace creative potential with a host of subjectivities—permanently reterritorialized by a capitalist logic that feeds on social emptiness. Given this landscape, how can we resist the tension of hegemonic capitalism? It seems we are no longer in an era of savage, bloody capitalism, but rather a friendlier, more polished, and more perfumed version. What are your thoughts on this?*

Peter McLaren: Perfumed capitalism is still capitalism. Resisting hegemony in the marketplace, especially when it has been transformed as sexy and full of postmodern delights, requires us first to recognize that capitalism has become extraordinarily adept at disguising its own brutality. It has learned to perfume exploitation. It can sell rebellion back to us as fashion, package dissent as lifestyle, and transform difference itself into a commodity. The system does not always demand conformity anymore; frequently it invites us to be different, as long as our difference can be marketed, consumed, and made profitable.

When I wrote *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture*, I was concerned with precisely this capacity of capitalism to colonize identity. The marketplace was becoming more than a place where commodities were exchanged. It was becoming one of the principal cultural spaces in which people learned who they were supposed to be. Identity increasingly became something assembled from commodities, images, styles, brands, entertainment, and manufactured desires. We were encouraged to experience ourselves as consumers before experiencing ourselves as historical subjects capable of collectively transforming the conditions of our existence.

That process has intensified enormously. Capitalism today does not simply sell us objects; it sells us versions of ourselves. It offers identities almost as subscription services. We display ourselves, curate ourselves, brand ourselves, and increasingly measure our social existence through technologies whose architecture has been designed for accumulation. Even our resistance can become content. The revolutionary slogan appears on a T-shirt; rebellion becomes an advertising aesthetic; radical language circulates through platforms owned by some of the most powerful corporations in human history.

This is why I would be cautious about describing contemporary capitalism as kinder than the capitalism of the past. It may sometimes appear more tolerant,

cosmopolitan, technologically sophisticated, and culturally permissive. It may wear better clothes. It may speak the vocabulary of diversity. It may celebrate individual expression. But beneath the perfume we still encounter exploitation, dispossession, imperialism, racialized inequality, ecological destruction, and the enormous concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a relatively small capitalist class.

Indeed, the perfume can make capitalism more difficult to resist because domination that presents itself openly as domination is easier to recognize. Domination that presents itself as freedom is considerably more dangerous.

The question for critical pedagogy, therefore, is how we help students distinguish between the freedom to choose among commodities and the freedom to participate collectively in creating another kind of society. Those are radically different conceptions of freedom. One asks: *What can I buy? What can I become? How can I distinguish myself from everyone else?* The other asks: *What can we create together? What forms of suffering have we learned not to see? What relations of power make that suffering possible? And how can those relations be transformed?*

This requires more than media literacy or teaching students to recognize manipulation in advertising. It requires developing what Freire understood as critical consciousness: learning to read the word and the world simultaneously. Students need opportunities to understand their desires historically, to ask where those desires come from, whose interests they serve, and what kinds of human relationships they make possible or impossible.

But critique by itself is insufficient. If education merely teaches young people that everything has been commodified, that corporations manipulate desire, and that capitalism absorbs resistance, we risk producing cynicism rather than revolutionary hope. A student who believes that the system absorbs everything may eventually conclude that resistance itself is futile.

Critical pedagogy must therefore create spaces in which another social imagination becomes possible. We need forms of solidarity that cannot easily be reduced to consumer preference: collective struggle, friendship, love, artistic creation, political organization, care for others, and participation in communities fighting for dignity. These experiences remind us that human beings are not merely consumers navigating a marketplace. We are unfinished historical beings capable of making and remaking the world.

This is where my work has increasingly moved toward what I now call revolutionary prophetic pedagogy. We must expose the structures of capitalist exploitation, certainly, but we must simultaneously recover the capacity to imagine what does not yet exist. Resistance cannot consist solely of saying *no* to capitalism. It must contain a *yes*—a commitment to forms of life organized around solidarity rather than accumulation, use value rather than exchange value, cooperation rather than competition, and human flourishing rather than profit.

Capitalism may perfume itself. It may illuminate the marketplace with seductive images and invite us into an endless carnival of consumption. But perfume cannot abolish exploitation; it can only make exploitation temporarily more difficult to smell.

The task of critical pedagogy is to help us recover our senses.

Rodolfo Cisneros: *Peter, I believe one problem with teaching critical pedagogy is that a significant number of university students arrive in the classroom already alienated. Their time there often fails to spark much change in them—there is little will for transformation and little empathy. This is often because, even though critical pedagogy is included in curricula and syllabi, academia itself has become capitalist and, in some cases, fascist. How can we act within academia against academia?*

Peter McLaren: I can only speak with any authority about the university system I know best, particularly that of the United States, and I should begin by acknowledging that my own position has changed. I am a recently retired **emeritus professor**. I remain intellectually active and associated with the university, but I no longer face the same professional consequences for speaking publicly that confront an assistant professor seeking tenure, an adjunct professor waiting for a contract renewal, or even an active tenured full professor whose university is under intense political pressure.

That distinction matters. It would be irresponsible for someone in my present position simply to tell younger academics, “**Be courageous. Speak out.**” Courage has consequences, and those consequences are distributed very unequally.

I know something about those consequences from approximately four decades of university teaching. Before entering university life, I spent five years teaching elementary school in Toronto. I subsequently taught at Brock University in Canada, spent approximately twenty years at UCLA, and then ten years at Chapman University in Orange, California, where I now live. I also served as a Chair Professor in China. Throughout that journey I was fortunate to have colleagues and friends—including critical educators such as **Henry Giroux and Donaldo Macedo**—who helped create intellectual and institutional spaces in which critical pedagogy could survive.

I also faced sustained criticism, including attacks from conservative Republican operatives who objected to my politics, my Marxism, my work in critical pedagogy, and my political associations. There were moments when the controversy was not simply theoretical. When powerful political forces identify professors as ideological enemies, the consequences can become very real.

I survived.

But survival should not be confused with invulnerability, nor should my experience be turned into a heroic narrative. I survived partly because I had tenure, partly because I had established an international scholarly reputation, partly because colleagues defended the legitimacy of critical pedagogy, and partly because earlier generations of critical scholars had already fought to create institutional space for this work.

Young academics today cannot necessarily count on those protections.

This brings us directly to the question: **How do we act within academia against academia?**

The formulation is deliberately paradoxical, and I think the paradox is exactly right. We work inside institutions whose practices we frequently oppose.

Universities can create extraordinary spaces for intellectual discovery, friendship, creativity, and dissent. Yet they also reproduce class hierarchies, bureaucratic domination, competition, credentialism, exploitation, and increasingly the logic of the corporation.

The contemporary university speaks incessantly about innovation, diversity, inclusion, excellence, and freedom of inquiry while simultaneously becoming more dependent upon donors, corporate partnerships, rankings, government funding, tuition revenue, branding, and reputation management.

Under such conditions, **academic freedom becomes vulnerable to political economy.**

This vulnerability has become especially apparent when governments threaten universities with the withdrawal of public funding. Administrators may proclaim their commitment to academic freedom, but those principles can become considerably less secure when billions of dollars, federal research grants, institutional accreditation, donor relations, or the public reputation of the university appear to be at stake.

Public universities can face enormous pressure when Washington threatens their funding. Private universities face somewhat different pressures but are hardly immune. Wealthy donors, trustees, politicians, media campaigns, alumni networks, and organized political groups can all exert influence. Universities increasingly operate as brands, and brands are notoriously anxious about reputational risk. A vocal professor can therefore become transformed from an intellectual asset into a **public-relations liability**.

This is one of the great contradictions of contemporary higher education. Universities celebrate intellectual courage retrospectively. They erect buildings named after dissidents once those dissidents are safely historical. They celebrate Martin Luther King Jr., Paulo Freire, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, and other figures who challenged established power. Yet institutions can become remarkably uncomfortable when dissent appears not in a commemorative lecture but in the office down the hallway.

The university often prefers **domesticated dissent**, criticism that can be placed on a syllabus, discussed at a conference, published in an academic journal, and cited without threatening the institutional arrangements that make the discussion possible.

Critical pedagogy faces the same danger.

It is entirely possible for critical pedagogy to become academically respectable while becoming politically harmless. Students can memorize the banking model of education, conscientization, praxis, hegemony, ideology, and cultural capital, pass an examination, receive an A, and leave the classroom without having seriously reconsidered their relationship to the world.

In that situation, **critical pedagogy itself has been commodified**.

It becomes another credential.

Another course.

Another citation.

Another item on the curriculum.

This helps explain the alienation described in the question. Students do not arrive at universities as empty vessels awaiting political enlightenment. They arrive after years of living within capitalist culture. They have already been subjected to enormous pressures—to compete, accumulate credentials, construct marketable identities, fear economic insecurity, manage debt, cultivate online personas, and understand education principally as an investment in their future earning power. Then we place them in a course called “critical pedagogy” and expect fifteen weeks of reading to undo an entire social formation.

That expectation is unrealistic.

The alienation students bring into the classroom is not simply an individual psychological defect. **It is socially produced.**

If students appear indifferent, we should ask what kind of society produces indifference.

If they lack empathy, we should ask what institutions reward competition over solidarity.

If they appear politically apathetic, we should ask what repeated experiences have taught them about whether political participation actually changes anything.

Critical pedagogy begins when we stop blaming students for the consciousness that history has helped produce.

But neither should we underestimate them.

The critical classroom can still become a place of interruption—a space in which the apparently natural suddenly becomes questionable. The teacher's responsibility is not to convert students to Marxism, socialism, critical pedagogy, or any other predetermined political identity. Indoctrination is the opposite of liberation.

Our responsibility is to create conditions in which students learn to **interrogate the forces that have shaped their consciousness**, including the ideas of the professor standing before them.

This requires dialogue rather than conversion.

And it requires risk.

But the amount of risk one can responsibly assume depends upon one's institutional position. An adjunct instructor supporting a family cannot necessarily confront university power in the same way as a distinguished tenured professor. An assistant professor approaching a tenure decision occupies a different position from mine as an emeritus professor.

We must stop pretending these differences do not matter.

Solidarity means that those with greater institutional protection should sometimes assume greater risks.

Tenured professors should defend vulnerable colleagues. Senior scholars should use their reputations to create space for younger scholars. Faculty organizations and unions should protect academic freedom collectively rather than leaving individual professors to confront political attacks alone. When administrators are pressured to silence a scholar, colleagues should understand that the issue extends beyond the individual involved.

Because once an institution learns that one professor can be sacrificed without resistance, the boundary of permissible speech has already moved.

This is why we must act **within academia against academia**.

We use the resources of the university against its own tendencies toward commodification and authoritarianism. We use classrooms to create democratic dialogue. We use libraries to preserve histories that political authorities would prefer forgotten. We use research to expose structures of domination. We use tenure, where it still exists, to protect unpopular inquiry. We use faculty

organizations to defend vulnerable colleagues. We use our relationships with students to demonstrate that education can be something other than a commercial transaction.

In other words, we inhabit the contradiction rather than pretending we can escape it.

There is no pure space outside power from which the critical educator can speak. Even the radical professor receives a salary. We teach within institutions implicated in capitalism, colonial histories, military research, corporate funding, property accumulation, and systems of hierarchy. Recognizing this does not invalidate critical pedagogy. It makes critical pedagogy necessary.

The important question is whether we allow those contradictions to produce cynicism or **praxis**.

Cynicism says: *The university is compromised, therefore nothing can be done.*

Praxis says: *The university is compromised, therefore we must identify the spaces within it where struggle remains possible.*

Those spaces exist.

Sometimes they are enormous. Sometimes they consist of fifteen students sitting around a seminar table.

But history has repeatedly demonstrated that ideas produced in apparently marginal spaces can travel astonishing distances.

This is also why the university must remain connected to struggles beyond its walls. Critical pedagogy becomes sterile when academics speak only to other academics. Universities should be porous to social movements, workers, teachers, migrants, community organizations, Indigenous struggles, anti-racist movements, peace movements, ecological movements, and movements against poverty and authoritarianism.

The critical educator must continually ask: **Who is absent from this conversation?**

And then find ways of bringing the university into dialogue with those whose knowledge academia has historically excluded.

There is another danger we should acknowledge. Academics can become extraordinarily skilled at criticizing domination while reproducing domination in their own departments. We can write brilliantly about democracy while treating graduate students badly. We can publish articles about solidarity while competing viciously for prestige. We can condemn capitalist hierarchy while obsessing over rankings, citations, grants, endowed chairs, and institutional status.

Critical pedagogy must therefore turn its critique upon itself.

If we are serious about acting within academia against academia, our everyday institutional practices must become part of the struggle.

How do we treat students?

How do we treat staff?

How do we treat adjunct faculty?

Whose work receives recognition?

Who performs the invisible labor?

Who feels permitted to speak?

Who remains silent because speaking carries too great a cost?

These questions are as political as anything appearing in our books.

And here I return again to the question of courage. Courage within the university should not mean spectacular acts of individual defiance followed by professional martyrdom. We need forms of **collective courage** capable of sustaining dissent over time.

Universities become easier to discipline when professors become isolated entrepreneurs competing against one another.

Solidarity interrupts that logic.

The struggle therefore involves building relationships strong enough that when one colleague is attacked, others refuse to disappear.

After approximately forty years as a university professor, I have learned that institutions can be remarkably resilient in defending themselves. But I have also learned that institutions are never completely closed. There are always contradictions, openings, unexpected alliances, courageous students, principled colleagues, and moments when people refuse to behave according to the roles assigned to them.

Critical pedagogy lives in those openings.

Today, as an emeritus professor, my own responsibilities have changed. I can write and speak with freedoms that younger academics may not possess. That means I should use those freedoms rather than merely enjoy them.

Those of us who have survived long enough to acquire some institutional protection have a responsibility to help create space for those coming behind us. Perhaps that is one answer to the question of how we act within academia against academia:

We turn whatever privilege the institution has given us into protection for those whom the institution leaves vulnerable.

We refuse the commodification of knowledge.

We resist the reduction of students to customers.

We defend academic freedom against political intimidation.

We build solidarity across academic hierarchies.

We connect classrooms to struggles outside the university.

And above all, we refuse to allow critical pedagogy itself to become another harmless commodity displayed in the curriculum of the neoliberal university.

The university is a site of domination.

But it remains a site of struggle.

And as long as there are teachers and students willing to transform classrooms into places where the world can be named, questioned, and imagined otherwise, **the struggle within academia against academia remains possible.**

Rodolfo Cisneros: *Finally, dear Peter, I would like to mention that your book on "Che" Guevara and Paulo Freire is one of the best I have ever read, both personally and academically. Two things from that book always stay with me: 1) the fact that, in the section dedicated to "Che" Guevara, you chose to devote a significant number of pages to the EZLN and Zapatismo; and 2) your call for educators who discuss Freire in their classes not to depoliticize him. I understand that this happens when he is reduced to just a few quotes or merely the practice of sitting in a circle. It makes me realize that one could easily teach students to be indifferent to the intolerable. What is your perspective on this, dear Peter?*

Peter McLaren: Thank you for your generous words about my book on **Che Guevara and Paulo Freire**. I am particularly pleased that you have held onto those two aspects of the book, because they remain important to how I understand revolutionary critical pedagogy today.

Let me begin with Che.

Che should not be embalmed as a romantic icon of revolution, reduced to the famous image reproduced endlessly on posters, T-shirts, and coffee mugs. There is a peculiar irony in capitalism's ability to turn one of its most recognizable revolutionary opponents into a commodity. Che becomes another brand, while the political commitments for which he lived and died are conveniently removed from the image.

What interests me is the **revolutionary humanism** in Che's thought: his insistence that revolutionary transformation cannot simply replace one governing elite with another. It must participate in the creation of different social relations and, ultimately, different ways of being human. Revolution is not simply about capturing state power. It concerns the transformation of the social relations through which people encounter one another and understand themselves.

That is one reason I devoted substantial attention to the **EZLN and Zapatismo**.

The Zapatistas offered an extraordinarily important challenge to traditional conceptions of revolutionary politics. They were Indigenous revolutionaries confronting neoliberal capitalism, racism, colonialism, and the Mexican state, but they also raised profound questions about what it means to exercise political power.

Their struggle helped shift revolutionary attention from the question *How do we seize power?* toward another question: **How do we create forms of collective life in which power itself is reorganized?**

Zapatismo also demonstrated that revolutionary struggle need not be based upon a single universal blueprint imposed upon every historical situation. Indigenous communities in Chiapas brought their own histories, cosmologies, political practices, and experiences of colonial domination into dialogue with Marxist and revolutionary traditions. Their famous insistence upon creating “**a world in which many worlds fit**” represented something profoundly important for critical pedagogy: unity does not require uniformity.

That remains one of the lessons revolutionary educators should take seriously.

And today I would return to Che for another reason.

We are once again witnessing intense political attention directed toward Cuba from the United States. Secretary of State **Marco Rubio**, a Cuban American and a longstanding opponent of the Cuban government, has publicly stated that he would

like to see Cuba's system of government change. We should be precise here: that is not the same thing as saying that the United States has announced an invasion or an immediate military plan for regime change. But the language of regime change inevitably carries historical weight in Latin America, and nowhere more obviously than Cuba.

The history is impossible to ignore. In April 1961, the United States supported the **Bay of Pigs invasion**, in which the CIA trained and funded Brigade 2506, composed of Cuban exiles, as part of an operation intended to overthrow Fidel Castro's government. The invasion was defeated by Cuban forces within two days. U.S. government historical records themselves document the CIA's organization, training, and funding of the exile force.

The failure at the Bay of Pigs did not end U.S. efforts to remove the Cuban government. The Kennedy administration subsequently authorized **Operation Mongoose**, a covert program explicitly designed to accomplish what the invasion had failed to achieve: removing Castro's government from power.

That history is relevant when we read Che today.

One need not romanticize the Cuban Revolution or refuse criticism of the Cuban government in order to oppose the assumption that the United States possesses the right to determine Cuba's political future. A revolutionary critical pedagogy should be capable of holding both propositions simultaneously: **Cuban society can be subjected to criticism, and Cuban sovereignty can be defended against external domination.**

The people of Cuba must ultimately determine the future of Cuba.

Reading Che again in this context therefore means reading him not simply as a historical figure but as part of a much longer Latin American confrontation with imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and the question of national sovereignty.

This brings me to Paulo Freire and the second part of your question.

I have repeatedly argued that **Freire must not be depoliticized.**

There is perhaps no more effective way of neutralizing a radical thinker than celebrating him.

Once a revolutionary intellectual becomes sufficiently famous, institutions can embrace the vocabulary while removing the politics. Freire becomes “student-centered learning.” Dialogue becomes sitting in a circle. The banking model becomes an amusing classroom metaphor. Praxis becomes another word appearing on a PowerPoint slide.

And suddenly everybody is Freirean.

But the oppressed have disappeared.

Capitalism has disappeared.

Class struggle has disappeared.

Colonialism has disappeared.

Imperialism has disappeared.

Liberation has disappeared.

Freire remains, but the political reason for Freire has been removed.

This is not critical pedagogy.

Freire did not develop dialogue because he believed classrooms would be friendlier if students sat in circles rather than rows. Dialogue was connected to a revolutionary conception of humanization. It challenged the division between those authorized to possess knowledge and those expected merely to receive it. Dialogue was part of a political project through which oppressed people could become subjects rather than objects of history.

Similarly, conscientization was never simply “critical thinking.”

Universities love the phrase *critical thinking* because it can mean almost anything and therefore threaten almost nothing. One can teach students to evaluate

arguments carefully while leaving entirely untouched the social relations responsible for exploitation and oppression.

Conscientization is more demanding.

It asks us to perceive the **social, political, economic, and historical contradictions that organize our lives and then to act upon that understanding.**

That final element—action—is what is frequently removed when Freire enters the institutional curriculum.

We teach students to recognize injustice.

We ask them to write an essay about injustice.

We grade the essay.

They graduate.

And the injustice remains.

This is what your formulation about teaching students to become **indifferent to the intolerable** captures so powerfully.

Education can produce extraordinarily sophisticated forms of indifference.

A student can learn the vocabulary of oppression without developing solidarity with oppressed people. One can write about poverty without ever encountering the poor. One can publish articles about revolutionary pedagogy while organizing one's professional life entirely around promotion, prestige, citations, and academic status.

The danger is not ignorance.

The danger is learning how to know suffering without being disturbed by it.

That may be one of the most serious problems confronting education today.

We are surrounded by images of war, starving children, refugees, ecological catastrophe, racial violence, homelessness, and extraordinary concentrations of

wealth. Digital technology allows us to witness suffering almost instantaneously anywhere on the planet.

Yet constant exposure can produce not solidarity but numbness.

The intolerable becomes ordinary.

The extraordinary becomes another item in the news feed.

A dead child becomes an image we scroll past on the way to something entertaining.

This is where Freire remains indispensable.

Critical pedagogy must interrupt the normalization of suffering.

It must teach students not simply **what is happening**, but to ask:

Why is this happening?

Who benefits?

Who suffers?

What historical conditions produced it?

What structures allow it to continue?

And what can we collectively do about it?

This is also why Che and Freire belong together in the book.

Che represents revolutionary commitment carried into political struggle. Freire

represents revolutionary consciousness developed through pedagogical praxis.

Both, despite enormous differences in their histories and methods, confronted the question of what kind of human being is necessary for a society organized around liberation rather than domination.

And the Zapatistas complicate and enrich both traditions by reminding us that revolutionary politics must listen.

Perhaps that is especially important today.

The revolutionary educator cannot arrive among oppressed communities carrying a completed blueprint for their liberation. We must listen to the knowledge already

produced through struggle. Indigenous peoples, workers, migrants, racialized communities, women, LGBTQ people, peasants, and others confronting domination are not raw material awaiting enlightenment by the radical professor. They are producers of knowledge.

The role of critical pedagogy is to bring different forms of knowledge into dialogue while continually asking how knowledge can contribute to the struggle against domination.

This is also where my more recent idea of **revolutionary prophetic pedagogy** becomes relevant.

The prophetic educator must learn to recognize what society has trained itself not to see. Prophetic pedagogy names the intolerable precisely when the intolerable has become normalized.

Against fascism, it names fascism.

Against imperialism, it names imperialism.

Against poverty amid extraordinary wealth, it names exploitation.

Against war transformed into spectacle, it restores the humanity of those who suffer.

Against what I have called **ensepulcher**, it refuses the burial of historical possibility.

And against indifference, it insists upon revolutionary love.

The challenge for educators who teach Freire today is therefore not whether they can explain Freire correctly.

The question is whether **Freire remains dangerous in their classrooms**.

Does reading him disturb students' assumptions?

Does it force them to confront their location within structures of privilege and domination?

Does dialogue move beyond classroom technique toward solidarity?

Does conscientization lead toward praxis?

Does education help students become incapable of accepting the intolerable as normal?

If not, we may be teaching Freire while simultaneously defeating everything for which Freire struggled.

Che, Freire, and the Zapatistas remind us in different ways that revolutionary thought must remain connected to revolutionary possibility. None should be turned into an icon, slogan, commodity, or academic fashion.

They should remain provocations.

And perhaps the final responsibility of critical pedagogy is precisely this:

to educate human beings who refuse to become indifferent to the intolerable.

Author Details

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Peter McLaren is Professor Emeritus at the School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles. He received his Ph.D. from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, in 1984. He worked as an elementary teacher in the northwest end of Toronto in the 1970s and published a diary of his teaching experiences that became a Canadian bestseller. He taught in teacher education for a year in his native Canada at Brock University. He went on to teach for eight years at Miami University of Ohio, 20 years at the University of California, Los Angeles, and 10 years as Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies, The Donna Ford Attallah College of Education Studies, Chapman University, where he also served as Co-Director and International Ambassador for Global Ethics and Social Justice, for the Paulo Freire Democratic Project. He served as Chair Professor, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China (2015-

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He is the recipient of five honorary doctorates from Argentina, Chile, Finland, and Mexico and four Lifetime Achievement Awards. He is the 2023 recipient of the Paulo Freire Legacy Award from the American Educational Research Association. Professor McLaren is the Co-Founder of Instituto McLaren de Pedagogía Crítica, Ensenada, Mexico. He has also received numerous awards throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

In 2023 he was recognized as an International Thought Leader by Research Outreach and his book, *Pedagogy of Insurrection*, was named a Peter Lang Publications Classic. In 2023 and 2024 Professor McLaren was ranked among the top 2% of influential scientists in the world, according to the worldwide database compiled by Stanford University. He is the author and editor of over 40 books and hundreds of research publications.

Rodolfo Cisneros

Rodolfo Isaac Cisneros Contreras is a Mexican philosopher of education who holds a PhD in pedagogy and philosophy from the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at UNAM. He currently teaches at the National School of Anthropology and History, the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, and the Faculty of at UNAM, where he holds a permanent teaching post.

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